

Senate President Pro Tem Peter Kinder

Opening Address

Second Regular Session, Ninety-Second Missouri General Assembly

January 7, 2004

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, distinguished guests, Lt. Gov. Maxwell and the members of the Missouri Senate;

Today it is my privilege to welcome you as we convene the Second Regular Session of the Ninety-Second Missouri General Assembly.

The opening of any legislative session is an important event. Each session is different. Each is special. This session is remarkably so. Eleven years ago, when I was first sworn in to this body, the Senate was composed of lawmakers with decades of experience.

Today, we begin the last session in which these veteran lawmakers -- some with 40 years of legislative experience -- will be with us. Rest assured that we will ask much of you -- and your knowledge and experience -- as we work to best serve the citizens we represent.

Today, we also welcome a new member to our chamber, the Senator from the 11th District. Senator, we are delighted that you have joined our family. This is a special place, and serving here is a special privilege. We are glad you are with us, and we stand ready to help you and the citizens of the 11th District you represent here.

The past seven months have also seen great sadness visited on the Senate family, as we lost three of our great members. First was incumbent Ronnie DePasco, whom we lost in June. The months that followed saw the sudden deaths of former Sen. J. B. "Jet" Banks and Sen. Danny Staples. In these three beloved members, I count a former majority floor leader, an assistant majority floor leader and a bona fide majority character. All three were cherished, as each made major contributions, and each will be sorely missed.

In the same way each legislative session is special, so too, this Senate is special. Each branch of government, each legislative chamber, plays a unique role in our system of government. I -- like many of you -- place great stock in the rich heritage and traditions of the Missouri Senate. It is like no other legislative body. Perhaps our most essential tradition -- that of working together as Senators -- serves our citizens and this state especially well.

It is in this way that we have -- and always shall -- place our citizens first; first before politics, first before individual interests, first before special interests.

Like any family, we have our differences. Honest, reasonable people can differ, and will, often vigorously. Yet only unreasonable people reject civility as we work through these differences. Here, let us strive to maintain this tradition to truly serve the best interests of everyone.

The great English writer John Donne shared with us that "No man is an island unto himself." Nor, I might add, does a single legislative body constitute a government.

Today, as our session begins, let us renew our commitment to work with the House of Representatives, the state departments, and our Governor in a spirit of bipartisan cooperation.

Although we may be from different areas, different backgrounds and different political parties, we are all Missourians. Let us work together as Missourians in a way that puts the people of Missouri ahead of the politics of Missouri -- and of the United States.

I pledge cooperation with the Governor on proposals based on principle, sound financial policy and the best interests of the citizens.

I am confident that the House of Representatives and the Governor will join us in working to assure that placing the people ahead of politics is a principle that stands above compromise.

As we convene today, great challenges lie before us. Our foremost challenge, I believe, is assuring our state is guided in the right direction -- that we are moving forward on the right track.

As citizens, do we ourselves believe Missouri is on the right track by gaining 7,000 jobs, but losing 77,000 jobs?

Are citizens reassured when school budgets are cut while millions are spent on bathroom renovations in the Capitol -- over our objections?

Do citizens find comfort in paying fuel taxes for abandoned road projects or to drive over crumbling highways while we divert that fuel tax money to other departments of state government?

Does a company trying to bring in hundreds of new jobs find any reason why their permits are subject to endless delays while DNR finds time to plan an expansive new \$17 million building?

Is our own Tax Policy Committee reassured when the director of Economic Development testifies that the reason they gave millions in tax credits to companies that didn't exist was because their budget was too small?

What can we say to grieving families whose children were removed by DFS to a most tragic end?

What do our state workers think when we give them a \$50 a month raise, and this administration advances a rule to take half of that back in service fees to be paid to unions they choose not to join?

Do we ourselves take comfort in the state spending millions in renovating this chamber, only to have a chandelier fall to the ground, and learn that until last week, none of these lighting fixtures had a safety cable attached?

Chandeliers do not have the privilege of this floor. But we do. And, we must use that privilege to set Missouri on the right track. We must do so in a way that reassures citizens that we can do the job of governing, that we are responsible stewards of their hard-earned tax dollars and that they are getting the best possible state government, bar none.

To do this will require a new direction in fiscal accountability for Missouri government.

Last year, the governor of this state proposed a budget that was balanced on more than \$700 million in revenue that did not exist. Imaginary revenue. Revenue from taxes that did not exist, had not been approved by this body, had not been placed on the ballot and had not been approved by voters.

We did not pay for programs in the current fiscal budget with imaginary revenue. We cannot pay for programs in the new budget with imaginary revenue.

A couple of weeks ago, supporters dropped a plan that sought to place an "emergency tax increase" on the ballot. Those who had supported it abandoned the plan for one simple reason: There is not sufficient public support for a general tax increase in Missouri.

The people are telling us we must live within our means. And we shall live within our means.

During the first six months of this fiscal year, we are delighted that revenue collections are up by almost six percent over last year. That means our state is pulling out of its economic recession. Finally.

Let's give credit where credit is due: to hard working Missourians, the innovation of entrepreneurs and the determination of Missouri business and industry to succeed often in spite of, rather than because of, government programs, red tape and taxes.

Last year, this General Assembly stood firm against the call of the Governor and special interests in this state for higher taxes.

Had we not been firm in our resolve -- had we not stopped higher taxes -- the economic recovery now underway would not have been possible. Government would have consumed the growth, strangling the emerging recovery in its cradle.

Higher taxes is not the answer; smarter, more efficient, more accountable government is the answer.

Let smarter government begin here today.

Let us consider a cap on state spending. Let us establish a panel to review every state program every five years to make sure each program is absolutely essential and is running efficiently.

Let us ask the people whether they want fuel taxes to fund road repairs or to subsidize state departments.

Let us restore the confidence of our citizens in their government by establishing a commission guarding against the waste, fraud and the abuse of their tax dollars.

Let us give our full support to our joint Committee on Tax Policy as it works to review tax credits -- especially those that have been issued to companies that don't really exist.

Let us restore the confidence of citizens in their right to be informed by strengthening our state's sunshine laws. And let us restore the safety of our communities by stricter enforcement -- and disclosure -- of sex offender registration in our state.

One way in which we can restore citizen confidence is by continuing our prudent stewardship of the resources they provide for state programs and services.

Writing the state budget has always been one of the biggest jobs facing the Legislature each year. This past session, I was proud of the way our Senate Appropriations Committee worked in bipartisan fashion to secure a balanced, fair and workable state budget, and how this committee resolved to make tough budget choices under difficult circumstances.

This year, we again face tough choices. This year, again, the Senate will take most seriously the responsibility of passing a responsible, balanced budget with available revenues.

This must be complemented by policies that encourage departments and programs to be managed more effectively, reduce waste and inefficiency, and make the maximum use of available resources.

We have an opportunity to review these policies -- from taxation to the foundation formula -- including tax policies to support businesses in Missouri, rather than in other states, by closing so-called loopholes.

I believe that each of us here want to provide proper and adequate funding for our public schools, for our colleges, for our senior citizens and for our programs to help children and families.

Let us help education by assuring that dollars go to teachers and classrooms, instead of administrative budgets.

Rather than wasting money on promotions for a program too few seniors now find worthwhile, let us review our state's SeniorRx program and reshape it so that it fills the "donut hole" in the new federal prescription program enacted just a few months ago.

And, for the sake of our state's most at-risk youth, let us continue our efforts to restructure the state's Division of Family services to better protect our families and incorporate successful private sector programs that can better protect children who truly need our help.

We can and we must make improvements in these areas to assure that our state is moving in the right direction.

In addition to improving the fiscal accountability of Missouri state government, we must also set our state on the right track for job growth and economic development.

We as a state have endured the loss of more than 77,000 manufacturing jobs. Yet, manufacturing remains an important mainstay of our economy. This past year, the great American motorcycle company, Harley Davidson, enjoyed an increase in sales of 23 percent. Not only is this a great American company, it is also a great Missouri company, bringing jobs to Kansas City and St. Joseph.

Last year, Speaker Hanaway and I joined Gov. Holden in working with Ford to keep 2,600 jobs at the Hazelwood plant. Boeing is receiving contracts that will strengthen this company that is a national stalwart in meeting our transportation and our defense needs.

These and countless other Missouri companies need our help and support. They need less red tape, more efficient government cooperation and a pro-jobs environment in which they are empowered -- not hindered -- by government to succeed in the highly competitive marketplace.

Let us help these companies by reaching a proper and intelligent resolution to issues involving workers compensation in our state.

Let us help consumers and businesses by working together to address the costs of litigation and extreme jury awards.

This issue is affecting the quality of life of Missourians ranging from the availability of health care to the cost of consumer products.

As each of us knows, doctors are leaving Missouri. The people expect positive reform out of us, not slavish subservience to special interests.

No frivolous lawsuit has ever cured a sick or injured Missourian. Let us work together for common-sense improvements that protect workers, businesses, health-care providers and consumers alike.

In addition to supporting our traditional economic sectors, we must also set our state on a proper course toward a new, knowledge- and service-based economy.

Life sciences research means jobs for Missouri. Life science research means a better future for all of Missouri. Today, I ask your consideration in joining me in supporting a proposal by our University of Missouri system to improve its facilities in St. Louis, Columbia, Rolla and Kansas City to expand life-sciences and agriculture research.

These new facilities will increase the endowed professorships, attract millions of dollars in federal and private research investments, and stimulate our economy through more jobs for working Missourians both today and in the future.

The benefits of this science and research are essential. As the nation's second-largest beef producing state, life science and agricultural research is essential to maintaining this vital industry and in assuring the safety of the food supply.

Agriculture is our state's oldest industry, life-sciences research our newest. With proper support and policies by this General Assembly, both can grow and prosper to serve us all in the new economy of the 21st century.

During the next four and one-half months, we will face these challenges, as well as other issues that will emerge through the legislative session.

Our state motto, "United We Stand," is the key to the success of this session, and of the future of this state.

Together, as Missourians, we can succeed. None here wants us to fall, divided.

Each of us wants fair and reasonable taxation systems. Each of us places the highest priority on our public schools and colleges. We all want affordable health programs for citizens and common-sense regulations for our businesses and industries.

By working together, we can achieve each of these things.

By putting the people first, the programs, policies -- and even the politics -- will fall into their rightful place. Thank you.